



THERE'S ROOM HERE

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In the cold, sharp morning air on Christmas Eve, Luke puts the last of the luggage in the minivan. He nestles a suitcase between a box of snacks and a modest pile of Christmas presents.

He goes back inside the house to find Laura, his wife, packing up on-the-go breakfast for everyone. With a shared smile, Laura whispers, "It'll be a long day."

Luke and Laura each carry a still-sleeping child to the van. Looking out at the roads, he sees a clear path plowed through the snow. The cold winds blow against him as he walks. Silently, they buckle their kids into their seats. Luke shuts the door, places his hand on the outside of the van and closes his eyes. "*Father, please keep us safe,*" he prays under his breath. "*That's all I ask.*"

"Well," Laura says, looking back at the now waking boy and girl in the back of the van, "how's everyone doing?"

With no answer from the tuckered passengers, they drive down the cleared road, listening to Christmas music and anticipating the eight hours between them and Laura's sister's house.



After two hours of driving through empty highways, they pass a sign: “No Gas Station For 76 Kms. Fuel Up!”

They pull off the highway to find a gas station with a small convenience store. After refuelling, Luke turns the key – but is met with silence.

“Daddy, why isn’t the car starting?” their daughter asks.

Luke and Laura look at each other, dread in their eyes. Optimistically, he tries again.

And again.

And again.

“Daddy’s gonna figure it out,” Luke finally says, more to himself than the kids. He grips the steering wheel, as if doing so could help the engine come back to life. His jaw clenches even tighter. Laura reaches over to place her hand on his. Neither speak as they try to hold it together.

Laura checks her phone. Cell service is weak, cutting in and out as she tries to search for a mechanic.

“Be right back kiddos,” Luke says.

He goes inside the convenience store. His shoulders drop as he looks around – a coffee

station, baked goods, a small display of colouring books, paperback novels and tourism materials for sale, but no other customers in sight. He breathes in and grimaces. This is the last place he wants to be.

The clerk, an older gentleman, gives a brief look of recognition when he sees Luke’s face. He glances out the window at the family in the van, then back to Luke. Impassively he asks, “How far’s your destination?”

Luke returns an equally cold stare. “Far enough that we probably won’t make it for dinner,” he grumbles before holding up his phone. “And it appears we’re stuck outside the realms of cell service.”

“I’ll call the mechanic. Probably just a starter. He’s a good hour away, but he’s an honest man who will do the work on site.” The clerk turns his back to pick up the phone.

Dejected, Luke heads outside. Once back in the van, he leans over to Laura. “Looks like we’re camping out at this dump for a bit,” he whispers.

“I want a snack!” their daughter yells.

“I’m starving!” her brother adds.

Laura tries to keep the kids entertained as they sit and wait. Minutes later, there’s a knock on the

van window. The clerk stands outside. Luke rolls down his window, cold air blowing in.

“Well don’t just sit here, come on inside.”

They watch the older man walk back. Laura’s discomfort shows. Luke rolls his eyes. With the restless kids in the back, they begrudgingly get out of the van.

Once inside, Laura looks around the small store. “You’re okay with us just sitting in here?”

“No,” the clerk says shortly, “but over here.” He leads them to a back room where they walk in to see a blanket on the floor, along with a few bags of chips and muffins and sausage rolls. A small TV sits on a cardboard box, tuned in to a cartoon channel. The kids rush to the food.

“You’re far from the first weary travellers who needed shelter,” the clerk says simply, two cups of coffee in his hands. “The owner, he likes to be prepared in case. What’s a family road trip without car problems, right?”

Luke is taken aback by the room. The clerk extends one cup to Luke. He takes it, nodding a humble, “Thank you.”

“You didn’t have to do this,” he manages to say.

“It isn’t the Hilton, but it’s better than out there,” the clerk offers back.

“Let us pay for the food, please.”

“Don’t try to tie strings to something that never had any strings attached to it.” The clerk then goes about his business in the store, tidying shelves and reading a book behind the counter.

At a loss, Luke and Laura settle down and watch their kids, so enamoured with the humble room and salty snacks that you’d think it was Christmas morning.

Laura looks around. “This sure isn’t the

Christmas Eve I had in mind.”

Luke nods. “We’ll lose a whole day of our time there.”

“But we’re having chips for breakfast!” their son exclaims.

“And watching TV!” his sister chimes in.

Luke and Laura can’t help but laugh.

“Hey,” Laura whispers, “they’re not fighting for once.” *She’s not wrong*, Luke thinks to himself.



An hour later, the mechanic arrives. Luke meets him outside and explains the problem. The clerk brings the mechanic a cup of coffee as well. “Hey thanks Benny,” the mechanic says, then turns to Luke. “You couldn’t have broken down at a safer place than with this old fella.”

Back inside, Benny pulls a couple of colouring books off the shelf, unwraps them and gives them to the kids. Luke pulls out his wallet. “Let me pay you for these, please,” he insists.

“Consider it a Christmas gift,” Benny says.

“That’s very kind.” Luke stands at the front counter and looks out at the mechanic working on the van.

“Your kids are troopers,” Benny says. “They remind me a lot of my grandkids.”

“Why aren’t you with them on Christmas Eve?” Luke asks.

“They’re in the next town over. I close up shop around 8. They’ll be asleep by the time I get there but my daughter saves some dinner for me. Nothing the microwave can’t fix, right?”

“Must get lonely out here on a holiday, though,” Luke says. “This is not the Christmas Eve I imagined.”

“As you get older, holidays and occasions are more about when you observe them. That’s what I’ve found, anyway. Especially after these last couple years of isolation. I gladly take what I get, and I give thanks for it. I just roll with the punches life throws at me and trust that God’s got me in the right place with the right people.” With a shrug, he adds, “Gives me a chance to be a neighbour again, too.”

Luke looks at the kids. He closes his eyes, then says a prayer to himself: *Father, thank you for keeping us safe. Thank you for the van breaking down where we have shelter and food. Thank you for Benny, for his hospitality, and for*

showing your love to us through him.

The mechanic opens the door, letting in a gust of cold air. “All ready to go,” he yells over the wind.

Luke settles up the bill as Laura helps clean up the spare room. “Thank you, for everything,” she says to Benny. “Thanks for taking care of us. We won’t forget it.”

“Take care of yourself, and your family. And as nice as it was seeing you today, I hope you don’t need to take shelter anywhere but home. But if you do, there’s room for your family here.” Benny puts two cups of coffee on the counter, along with a bag of muffins. “Something for the way,” he adds.

As Laura and the kids walk out, Luke turns back. “Merry Christmas, Benny.”

Benny manages a small grin, and nods goodbye.

The kids clap and cheer as the van starts. Luke quickly takes a screenshot on his phone of their current spot on the GPS. “What’s that for?” Laura asks.

“Figure we could print the map, make it a Christmas ornament. Certainly a Christmas we won’t forget.”

Back on the road, Luke feels a small pang in his chest as the gas station gets smaller and smaller in his rearview mirror.

